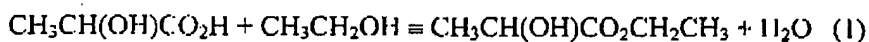


This listing of claims will replace the prior version in the application.

Claims

1. (currently amended) A continuous process for the preparation of ethyl lactate (I) by esterification of lactic acid [or of a lactic acid composition] using ethanol according to the reaction (1):



(I)

~~which consists in~~ comprising reacting said lactic acid with ethanol according to an ethanol/lactic acid molar ratio at least equal to 2.5, in the presence of a catalyst, at a temperature ranging from 50°C to 90°C ~~and preferably ranging from 80°C to 90°C~~, at atmospheric pressure; said process ~~being characterized in that comprising:~~

- ~~continuously extracting~~ a mixture comprising ethyl lactate, unconverted lactic acid, ethanol, water and small amounts of heavy products ~~is continuously extracted~~, at atmospheric pressure, from the reaction medium at a degree of conversion of the lactic acid at most equal to 80%; then ~~in that~~
- ~~subjecting this mixture is subjected~~ to a flash separation at a temperature of between 80°C and 90°C and under a pressure of less than or equal to 65 mbar, and ~~in that~~
- ~~on the one hand, the~~ subjecting a top stream from said flash separation, comprising ethyl lactate, ethanol and water, ~~is subjected~~ to a continuous fractional distillation, at atmospheric pressure, said top stream from said flash separation being introduced onto a specific plate of a distillation column; and
- ~~continuously recycling on the other hand, the a bottom stream~~, composed essentially of unconverted lactic acid and of heavy products, ~~is continuously recycled~~ to the esterification reaction medium; and ~~in that~~,
- recovering a mixture of ethanol and of water ~~is recovered~~ as a top product from the fractional distillation and
- recovering an ethyl lactate having a water content which makes possible its subsequent purification ~~is recovered~~ as a bottom product from the fractional distillation.

2. (previously presented) The process as claimed in claim 1, characterized in that use is made of an ethanol/lactic acid molar ratio ranging from 2.5 to 4.5.

3. (currently amended) The process as claimed in either of claims 1 and 2 ~~claim 1~~.

characterized in that the mixture is extracted continuously from the reaction medium when the degree of conversion of the lactic acid is between 65% and 75%.

4. (currently amended) The process as claimed in ~~any one of claims 1 to 3~~ claim 1, characterized in that the top stream exiting from the flash separation feeds a fractional distillation column at a point situated in the bottom part of said column.

5. (currently amended) The process as claimed in ~~any one of claims 1 to 4~~ claim 1, characterized in that the fractional distillation of the top stream resulting from the flash separation is carried out at a column bottom temperature ranging from 152°C to 165°C.

6. (currently amended) The ethyl lactate obtained as claimed in ~~any one of claims 1 to 5~~ claim 1, characterized in that it has a water content at most equal to 0.3%.

7. (new) The process as claimed in claim 1 characterized in that the temperature of said reaction ranges from 80°C and 90°C.

Respectfully submitted,



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